

# Homework

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## **Studio Practice Report**

**70 %**

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master of arts (visual arts)

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## **ABSTRACT:**

**HOMEWORK:** research into the working conditions of textile artists in the Canberra region. The research paper explores the notion of 'paid and 'unpaid' labour within the home and its relationship to textile artists. The Sub-thesis argues that when the workplace of the female textile artist is situated in close proximity of the home her 'professional' life suffers. A study taking the form of an exhibition of embroidered kitchen textiles exhibited at the Canberra School of Art Gallery from March 24 to April 2, 1994, which comprises the outcome of the Studio Practice component (70%), together with a Research Paper (30%), and a Report which documents the nature of the course of study undertaken.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

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## INTRODUCTION

My undergraduate study had been in interior design within the architecture school of Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. The four year course satisfied my expectations of a young person straight from high school interested in art and design. I only recently realised that the lack of enthusiasm for seeking regular employment in that area immediately after graduation, complicated by lack of personal self-confidence, shows that it was a poor personal choice for a career.

Embroidery began for me as part of a socially constructed ideal of the feminine, along with an innate drive to physically construct objects, regardless of whether it was ornate Barbie doll wedding dresses, soft toys, or simply lining chocolate boxes with fabric. As a young person I devoured my mother's popular women's magazines, for 'craft' ideas. I continued to work in textiles, particularly embroidery, throughout high school, tertiary study and my time at home with young children. It was constructed much in the way society views 'women's work' - as a hobby, something to fill in the spare hours, particularly during the period spent working 'at home'. In the height of the textile movement of the 1970's my involvement with textiles was principally as part of the audience. With the loss of momentum of the textiles movement in the mid 1980's, and as a woman with children, I began to believe my work could not be used as a vehicle to explore the personal, let alone the political.

The chance to embroider in a 'visible' situation - away from what I naively thought to be the 'private' and into the 'public' realm was on the Parliament House Embroidery during 1986, which now hangs in the upper gallery of the Great Hall of the new parliament house, Canberra. The embroidery was designed by Kay Lawrence.

This project was initiated by the ACT Embroiderers' Guild which I joined soon after my arrival in Canberra from Perth. I had never embroidered in a group with other skilled women. This relieved my sense of dislocation as well as fulfilling my embroidery desires. Superficially the common bond in the group is embroidery, but there also seems to be other socio-economic commonalities.<sup>1</sup>

Leading on from this project, guild members were enthusiastic to embark on another large embroidery. This time the site was the new Australian National Maritime Museum in Darling Harbour, Sydney. In my enthusiasm I offered to draw up any ideas that the guild might have: hence I became the designer of the next large scale embroidery.

I began to see embroidery as something being done outside the home, something public, receiving acclaim for the beautiful images and skills involved. I carried on with my own personal embroidery and textile

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<sup>1</sup> Embroidery in organised groups, such as the embroiderers' guilds, attracts women who either do not work outside the home or who have enough leisure time to devote to such activity. The purchase of materials, transport to the group meetings and child care if necessary, require a certain disposable income.

work, and set up a small business to sell my work. As my children were getting older I took on part time work to finance my business. Through my part-time work I quickly learnt that for the hours put in, the income was paid accordingly: my textile business was not. The drive to explore and produce textiles continued despite this enlightenment. I joined and became involved in many other groups: the Canberra Quilters, the Batik and Surface Design Association, the Crafts Council of the ACT. I finally realised that I didn't really need to learn technique. What I needed were the skills to develop and explore ideas. Without a clear understanding of these processes my work would remain aimless and it would be very difficult to build an intellectually satisfying career.

On return to study it had been empowering to remember that I could draw. Somewhere during motherhood this skill was lost in the foggy mist that appears to envelop the mind during prolonged periods of little or no of mental stimulation.

Moving from an entirely technique based craft to theory based art through my post graduate studies was an enormous step. I believe it would have taken far longer outside an institution, such as the Canberra School of Art.

#### THE AIMS OF THE STUDIO PRACTICE:

The initial aim of the studio practice was to explore the making of images and embroidered objects which reflect the culture of the suburban home/family environment. I wanted to use the image of women who work at home either because of family commitments or because of personal choice - hence the original title of my studio practice was "Women In Interiors". The works were to deal with the interior, private world and its relationship to the exterior. The interior spaces of domestic houses are often left to the female to arrange and decorate while the exterior world is left to the male. I, myself have continually felt the propensity to decorate surfaces, be it a social construct or an innate desire. Textile decoration has been one of the more accessible mediums that I have encountered. I have used architectural graphics to portray the physical structures which divide the male/female realms along with the depiction of the female figure, domestic icons, text, photographic images to emphasise this juxtaposition.

The relevance of embroidery as a vehicle for my ideas has grown and has become more important than I was originally aware. The intercontextualisation of the medium, the images and the theory built up a momentum in the final months so that time and energy were the limitations.

The culture of women 'at home' is shifting as changes in Australian society occur. The period of time women spend at home with children is shrinking dramatically. No longer do all women give up paid work to care full time for children and husbands. The previously ubiquitous



housewife is disappearing and the decreasing period 'at home' can be a positive, reflective time, and change in direction can be contemplated. Desires, conscious or unconscious, for eventual freedom are realised. Some relish this period of their lives by building interior structures within, reinforcing and protecting the shell. It often seems in pupa form that all life is suspended, yet internal changes are taking place. Some fight the containment of social and environmental structures imposed, eager to resume their identity which has undergone change.

Initially I began by exploring the mechanisms which uphold any culture - rites and rituals, heroes, artefacts and myths. Over the last two years I have been looking at these issues of women in suburbia on a personal level - how I have perpetuated this role of women at home through my own rituals which have derived unconsciously not only from socially constructed values and beliefs, but also from embellished memory of my own childhood.

## STUDIO PRACTICE

I began using housework themes by developing urban icons. I researched other icons in other contexts (eg Egyptian hieroglyphics and medieval manuscripts) seeing how they were used as language. I began to draw and dissect the parts of an iron using these images as hieroglyphics - building up a personal visual language. Minor textile pieces were constructed as explorations of the ritual of housework: washing, hanging, folding, ironing, arranging and rearranging. Often alone or encumbered by children. My view was reinforced in reading the catalogue of the Makers' Choice where tapestry artist Kay Lawrence cites in her essay a passage from Lynne Strahans' "The Half Open Door":

"The worst thing about housework is not the terrifying inroads it makes into time, but the state of mind it encourages in which the arrangement of objects is confused with the control over one's life."

Many novels by female writers also explore this theme. In particular I have enjoyed visualising the reflections mirrored by:

"Housekeeping" by Marilynne Robinson

"Hanged Man in the Garden" by Marion Halligan

"Canberra Tales" Collection of Short Stories by female Canberra writers

"Blue Skies" by Helen Hodgeman

Feeling guilty about watching television one night, I decided to iron one of the three baskets of washing. As I began to iron, images passed through my mind. I abandoned the ironing and began to draw instead. Then got my partner to iron while I drew. The drawings soon developed into a series about a woman ironing, watching television but naked. These four images were about the assumptions made of 'at home culture':





**FIGURE 1 ECONOMIC USE OF TIME (no 1)** Hand embroidered  
cotton on linen 43 x 30 cm 1992

- how myths and heroes/heroines are upheld through television and popular press magazines,
- social constructs of the feminine,
- femininity of housewives,
- how women spend their time in suburbia,
- the rites and rituals of housework and meal preparation,
- through the use of icons and artefacts such as the iron, washing basket, vacuum cleaner and television.

I was also interested in looking at the relationship of the naked figure and the viewer of the image. I did not want to portray the figure as a sexual object, but rather looking at the female form in her interior, sculpting her in the texture of thread, without the traditional 'male gaze'. I also use the naked figure as a pupa undergoing change.

All throughout my work I was conscious of the image of women - working with the female figure and the 'male gaze'. Martha Banta's book Imaging American Women<sup>2</sup> heightened this awareness. Her work is a history of the image of women in America through painting, sculpture, photographs, and during the last hundred years, advertising. The book considers issues such as images of identity (the American image), desire, the ideal and the visual subtleties in advertising.

Val Williams Book The Other Observers<sup>3</sup> addresses the idea that women view women differently to men through the medium of photography in Britain. I began to seek out and read feminist literature concerning this viewpoint. It was at this point also in my thesis that I began to incorporate, not only the original proposal of looking at the negative associations inherent in femininity and textiles, but also the contribution of feminism to textiles.

Some years ago I saw some drawings by Fred William of his daughter - she watching television. Like most other children, the figure was in a strange but comfortable position - unconscious of anything but the television. I used this image from memory, translating it into the woman ironing alone, relaxed, drawn into the fantasy of the television.

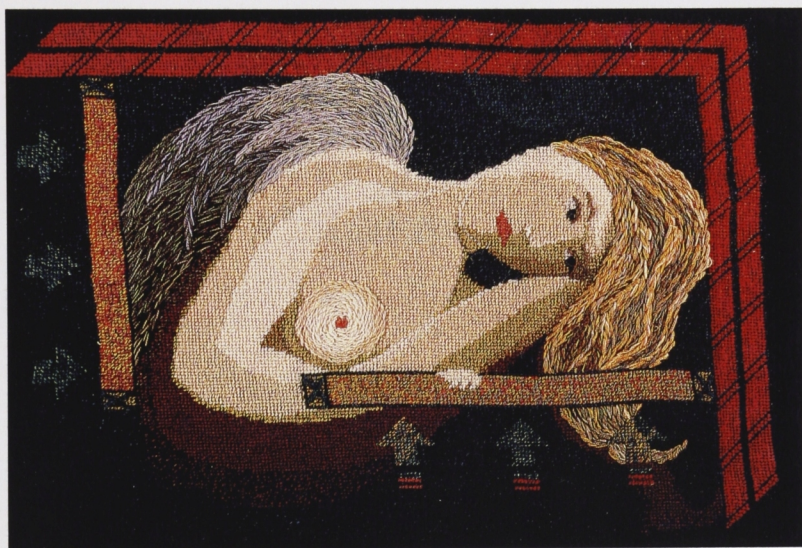
By July 1992 I had completed four embroidered works which reflected the mechanisms mentioned: the ritual of ironing, the heroes/heroines of television, the myths of what women do in their environments and the artefacts - the iron, the television, the rug (See FIGURE 1). I went on to explore these ideas further through drawings which did not result, nor I think needed to, in embroidered works.

At the beginning of the first semester, 1992, at the Canberra School of Art I undertook a class "Issues In The Decorative Arts" taught by Anne Brennan as I felt I had difficulty with the language and jargon used in discussions. I elected to give a student paper on "The Designed Space"

<sup>2</sup>Banta, Martha. Imaging American Women Columbia University Press, USA, 1987

<sup>3</sup>Williams, Val. The Other Observers Virago Press, London, 1991





**FIGURE 2 PLANS FOR THE HOUSEWIFE (no 1)** Wool on canvas work  
60 x 40 cm 1992/93

of which I felt quite confident, as my undergraduate studies were in interior design. The research reawakened my interest in architecture and suburbia. My first 'port of call' was to re-read Robin Boyd's book Australia's Home<sup>4</sup> on the suburban sprawl of Australian cities. The theory behind my visual work began to take shape through writing this paper and the research enabled me to later convert to a Master of Arts program.

I started to relate my visual work to this topic - the imposition of interior spaces on women and how they are affected. From these notions I investigated the use of the cyanotype process - the old 'blue printing' method used by architects to reproduce their drawings onto linen. A combination of printing over embroidery paralleling the imposition of boundaries over activities within. The noxious chemicals used in this process deterred me from carrying the project through. The next eighteen months saw me experimenting with photocopy transfer onto fabric.

Meanwhile a new set of drawings evolved through looking at the restrictions of interiors. I began overlaying architectural drawings and house plans on my images of women, and using them as a background. Embroidered samples were worked alongside these drawings to produce a series of images in canvas work of a metamorphic process. It begins with the woman restricted by her environment and undergoing change within the structures. The environment in which the woman sits becomes more restrictive and she metamorphoses within the house until she actually becomes the house. (FIGURES 2 - 4)

I began embroidering on this series of work in November of 1992. It was wool on canvas work using the image of a woman/mother as the angel/perfect (FIGURE 2). The medium was chosen as it is an extremely common technique used in prepackaged embroidery 'kits' with the design prepared onto the canvas. It is mistakenly known as 'tapestry'. (Tapestry being a woven structure).

The figure is caught up in the architecture of her house. I began looking at the affects of 'architecture' or rather the suburban buildings/structure which restrict the inner life. The piece moved into a series in which the figure distorts from a soft rounded form into geometric shapes - the figure becomes suburbia. I used a very dark background in the first piece to allude to the hidden areas of the woman's mind.

The figure becomes the housework and her house. Her hair weaves into the washing basket, the wings become an ironing board; her body starts to geometrise into the suburban house roof shapes (FIGURES 3 - 4).

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<sup>4</sup>Boyd, Robin. Australia's Home Penguin Books, Ringwood Victoria, 1971 edition





**FIGURE 3 PLANS FOR THE HOUSEWIFE (no 3)** Wool on canvas work  
60 x 40 cm 1992/93

My favourite reading at this time was Robert Nelson's paper "Hoists and Washing Lines"<sup>5</sup> which describes the reality of being part of the domestic environment:

"Hanging out the washing is a bore, a processional tedium guaranteed to drain the arms of sanguine humours and render the fingers clammy for the rest of the day. It is sufferable only when someone else shares the bloodless stewardship of the pegs; but alas who will volunteer? When the washing machine finishes its cycle and the magic of technology turns by dread degrees to a standstill, the dark and steamy chore of ages resumes. No more energised tumbling in the white purgatory now but a mute laying on of hands to extract the moist burden, load it into a laundry basket and take it outside to dry."

Meanwhile I was looking at Davida Allen's paintings and read her fictitious novel Close to the Bone.<sup>6</sup> The attraction to Allen's work concerning suburban life had a freshness and immediacy which differed from the laboured work I was producing. This began to raise questions of the use of a time consuming media and of whether I was hampered by the design education of which I am a product.

The body of work completed over the summer of 1992/93, Plans For the Housewife, looked at the containment and imposition of interiors on 'domestic' women, through incorporating house plans and architectural drawings, reflecting that architecture does not always reflect the way we live or want to live. It is more often than not a reflection of the designer's values - and women can be left out of the 'man-made' environment. The work continued over summer until my arm muscle deteriorated from continuous overwork from embroidering with wool and canvas. The direction of my work had to change to accommodate this disability.

To rest my arm I travelled to Sydney in March 93 to work with Emma Robertson, a machine embroiderer originating from the Glasgow School of Art, Scotland and now lecturer at the University of NSW. Here I explored techniques such as a Riso machine which made small screen printing screens from photo copies. I printed up a series of images on fabric which then were machine embroidered onto a heavy backing which allowed a freedom to work with out a machine embroidery hoop. But the compromise was that the piece was stiff and only a build up of layers would create a three dimensional effect which seemed void of the usual textural effect of hand embroidery.

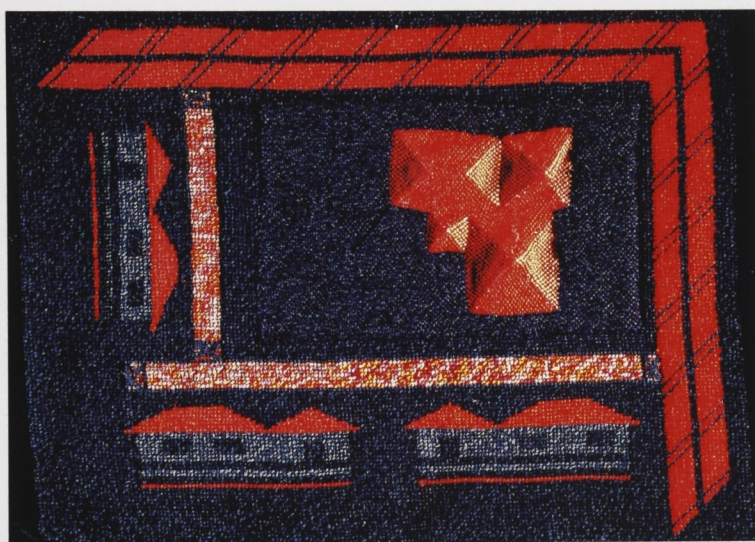
Talking with Emma, who was so conversant and familiar with embroidery, became a very important aspect of the visit. I was feeling depressed. My arm needed to be rested from hand embroidery, but I was reluctant about moving into machine embroidery.

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<sup>5</sup>Nelson, Robert. "Hoists and Washing Lines" essay from Forceps of Language edited by Bob Thompson Craft Realities 1992...

<sup>6</sup>Allen, Davida Close to the Bone





**FIGURE 4 PLANS FOR THE HOUSEWIFE (no 5)** Wool on canvas work  
60 x 40 cm 1992/93

I reviewed my entire sketch book with Emma, discussing all the ideas I had entertained and why they had been abandoned, and reassessed how they could be used and reworked.

From this I produced three pieces using the images of women from 1950's knitting books with abstracted architectural floor plans and drawings.

Back in Canberra I designed a 'sampler' using these women, with an image of a post-war house behind each figure and a series of architectural plans running along the base. I was trying to refer back to old embroidered samplers where a repeat motif was used across each line, decorative line work (in this case architectural lines) and text was included.

I continued to persist with the process of releasing the inks from the photocopy onto the fabric - using methylated spirits, turpentine, disperse crayons, bonding the photocopy onto the fabric with a double-sided bonding web and directly ironing the photocopy onto fabric. It felt like a quest; I knew it could be done but the method alluded me. The frustration of knowing I had damaged my arm and that the transferring technique wasn't working caused some reluctance as I machine embroidered over these images. The negative mind stopped all creativity.

A visit by the English machine embroiderer, Paddy Killer, helped me to overcome some reluctance for machine embroidery. I had always seen it as a bit messy and as a 'short-cut' in embroidering. Paddy's technique is very precise and sharp - something which I needed to see in order to reproduce architectural drawings within my own work. She also used text in her work which I also wanted to reproduce on my own textiles.

Not only did she end my reluctance to the machine, she also had a method of releasing photocopies onto fabric: using white spirit or fabric stiffener. These were the best result I had achieved so far.

As I got back into my own work I came to the realisation that the failed techniques were not to blame entirely for my progress. It was partly the images themselves. I came to realise that my own drawings produced a far more satisfying result.

My arm was now receiving treatment and after consulting with my supervisors it was decided that I continue solely on my sub-thesis for the rest of first semester.

What had bothered me with the earlier canvas work pieces was that they had no other function than to sit on the wall as 'pictures'. I had been so adamant that textiles were three dimensional pieces - textures - not stretched taut and hung like pictures on the wall. Diana Wood Conroy

has described textiles as "prelinguistic and sensory".<sup>7</sup> The attraction to textiles for me lies in their three dimensional , textural chiasma. The finishing of these pieces were difficult as I had thought them through as images rather than objects.

I half heartedly worked on the sampler piece and the direction of the next series worried me. Again, trying to intercontextualise, I wanted to keep the pieces within the domestic context and to make references to textiles, but knowing that as part of the Masters program, it had to be able to be shown in the Canberra School of Art Gallery rather than the intimate space of the domestic from where they originate. My answer has been a series of aprons which, initially, thought to lie flat on the wall but remain as a textile piece. (These will be installed in the round.) I began to research aprons through anthropological and textiles sources.

The turning point in my work began with the visit of artists Charley Hackett and Lindy Richardson from the Glasgow School of Art, Scotland. They helped to define both what my work was and was not about. Their stimulating approach to textiles was exciting. Lindy helped me to focus on keeping my embroideries as three dimensional textiles. Lindy's approach was to make it appear as though her work were remnants or unfinished pieces - as fragments of something possibly more unbelievably exciting. My embroideries contrasted in their tightness of design and finish.

I was encouraged to literally dump the images that were giving me such a hard time. I began to cut up the original aprons. I removed many images from my pin up boards surrounding my desk. I cleaned up my work space completely and began again.

With my sub-thesis well under way I could now concentrate on my studio work. I cut up many of the experiments from the photocopying transfers and collaged them onto new apron shapes. I worked basically in black, white and grey. These became a series of ten aprons concerned with the social construction of gender and the physical construction of houses. I had found an old diary of mine which I kept when I was sixteen. I was astounded to see that my writing was concerned with cooking, cleaning and other menial tasks. I machine embroidered the text onto five of the aprons: one with all text, and subsequent four adding personal photocopied transferred photos over the text. Alternating between these five private pieces I used white on white cut away image of more public images of social construction of women: the juxtaposition of male and female.

I have also used images from "Woman's World" an early 1960's publication. The book is a storehouse of images which adhere to the clean crisp 'scientific' approach to the domestic world. These 'scientific' approaches were encouraged earlier in the century and the naming of 'housewife' as an occupation was to give a professional approach to

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<sup>7</sup>Wood Conroy, Diana. "Outside Looking In: Textiles and Marginality Object, Autumn 1992, Crafts Council of NSW



the job. This had come about after WWI and was again repeated after WWII to encourage women to return from war induced industry back to the home.

### Hasten Slowly - Not To Be A Victim Of "Haste"

"Slowly was the dishes. Control your actions. Go quietly as though forbidden to make a sound. Force yourself to go slowly (this kind of force won't harm you).

Now change into street wear. Don't rip your clothing off the wardrobe hooks. Handle your garments gently.

Now the shopping list. Can't find a pencil and paper? Well don't ransack the drawers. Take things out carefully until you find what you want. DO EVERYTHING SLOWLY.

Now to the shops. Walk easily. Don't dart about.

How will you have benefited from this?

Firstly, you'll feel physically and mentally at ease. YOU will have done things well. You will have saved time. You will enjoy the contentment which comes when you master your impulses - and all because you went slowly.<sup>8</sup>

The dichotomy explored in the sub-thesis, paid/unpaid work, production/ reproduction and so on, was taken up in the aprons. The use of photos on the aprons showed the public face of the private family life. The people in the photos are arranged as a performance: 'this is the way we would like to be remembered'. The poses are particular to the camera eye. They document not "the culture pictured but the culture taking the picture".<sup>9</sup>

Even though the photos and the writing are of no significance to anybody other than myself and my family, they reflect the private which has in mind an eventual viewer. The diary is also a performance to be viewed: not for a particular reader but maybe an unknown bibliophile.

The diary writing and the photos were not synchronic but were a reconstructed memory in these textiles. As with memories, they were not sequential, but the mechanisms for evoking thoughts and recollections, acting as random prompts. Through this reconstruction, the physical records of these events are evidence of the pervasive nature of social construction. The work used personal memory to illustrate this point.

Jan Janeiro writes:

The acceptance of the inherent metaphoric qualities of time within the building of a textile has perhaps also worked to encourage the personal nature of many fibre works. For clearly, time-sequencing relates to narrative, storytelling, and to autobiographical forms such as diaries, journals and

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<sup>8</sup>Women's World pub M. A. White Melbourne (no other publication details available) pp451

<sup>9</sup>Mensing, Margo "Close to Home" Fibrearts pub Nove/Dec 1993 pp45



**FIGURE 5** TRADITIONAL FOLK COSTUMES OF GALLACIA ILLUSTRATING  
USE OF APRONS



**FIGURE 6 LEDA AND THE SWAN - PETER PAUL RUBENS 1598**



calenders which chart physical and emotional movement through time and space.<sup>10</sup>

As in traditional European costume, the use of pockets on the lower part of each apron was to emphasise and protect the female genitalia.<sup>11</sup> (see FIGURE 5) As domestic embroidered textiles, my aprons I again refer to the protection built up in the metamorphic 'at home' period. Some of the pockets are firm, white and smooth. Others are worn and sagging referring to the fact that the protective shell can be maintained and strengthened if the wearer wishes or alternatively indicating that the wearer may not need such protection.

Concurrently I made tea-cosies - an old familiar shape and object that I had been using since 1988. With these I worked a new collaging technique, using strong colours with heavy machine embroidery and applique. The fabric was cut in rectangles of various sizes which pertained to the carving up of land into the quarter acre block. The tea-cosies began as a direct response to my sub-thesis: the use of urban street plans of Canberra with a female figure appliqued in a visually detached manner. The tea cosy itself as a reference to a constructed, protective, metamorphic shell.

By October 1993, I began to realise that the textiles I constructed were taking the form of 'working' textiles: textiles that are used in the home to assist in the unpaid labour. The final body of work has narrowed down to images and text on kitchen textiles which are the most 'invisible' of all household textiles. The work concerns itself with the social construction of gender, the physical and psychological restrictions, unpaid labour, and the possibility of escape and change of the self and the ordinary: a metamorphic process.

In particular I am looking at the period of women's lives when they are involved with unpaid work in the home. As stated earlier I believe this can be a positive period for women to step out of public life into the private. This can give a new perspective to view the desires, conscious or unconscious of the woman. I am framing it in the positive so as to develop the images to give the viewer a sense of emergence from restriction, expansion, projection beyond the self and the ordinary.

This series of work began as very small hand embroidered images which would use icons of housework. As I had begun to see my work as 'working' textiles I began looking around the domestic interior for more such items. The pot holder was the perfect size for intensely hand embroidered images. I envisaged a long row of such textiles. (Nineteen will be hung.)

The initial image was taken from the Ruben's painting "Leda and the Swan" (see FIGURE 6) after a Ruben's exhibition at the National Gallery

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<sup>10</sup>Janeiro, Jan. "State of the Art: Contemporary Fibre" Surface Design Journal Fall 1993

<sup>11</sup>Paine Sheila Embroidered Textiles

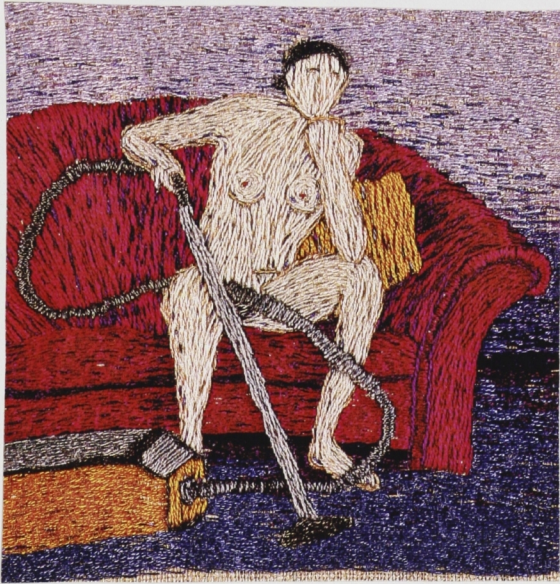


**FIGURE 7** **LEDA I** - Hand embroidered image for pot holder, cotton on linen, 9.5 cm sq



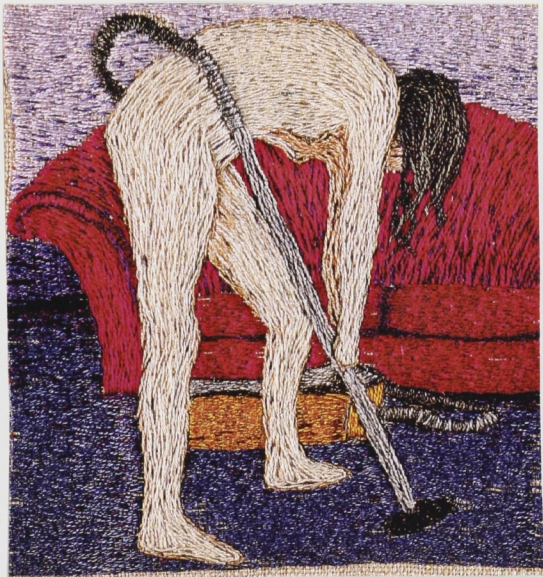


**FIGURE 8** **LEDA II** - Hand embroidered image for pot holder,  
cotton on linen, 9.5 cm sq



**FIGURE 9** LEDA III - Hand embroidered image for pot holder,  
cotton on linen, 9.5 cm sq





**FIGURE 10 LEDA VI** - Hand embroidered image for pot holder,  
cotton on linen, 9.5 cm sq



**FIGURE 11** **LEDA VII** - Hand embroidered image for pot holder,  
cotton on linen, 9.5 cm sq



of Australia in 1993. I mused at the idea of using such a large masculine painting and translating into a small feminine embroidery - much in the way Narelle Jubelin has carried out in her work. Research into the painting revealed that the god Jupiter often took on a disguise to visit married women. I prefer to use the Ancient Greek god Zeus, rather than the Roman god Jupiter as the stories became more relevant to my work.

Although it was within his (Zeus) province to guard the sanctity of marriage, Zeus as a woman did not hesitate to pay court to married women. Thus, he fell in love with Leda, the wife of Tyndareos. One evening when the young woman was bathing in a pool she saw floating majestically towards her a swan of dazzling white.



**FIGURE 12 LEDA VIII** - Hand embroidered image for pot holder, cotton on linen, 9.5 cm sq

<sup>12</sup> Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology. Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd, Middlesex, England, 1978, pp106

of Australia in 1993. I mused at the idea of using such a large masculine painting and translating into a small feminine embroidery - much in the way Narelle Jubelin has carried out in her work. Research into the painting revealed that the god Jupiter often took on a disguise to visit married women. I prefer to use the Ancient Greek god Zeus, rather than the Roman god Jupiter as the stories became more relevant to my work.

Although it was within his [Zeus] province to guard the sanctity of marriage, Zeus on occasion did not hesitate to pay court to married women. Thus, he fell in love with Leda, the wife of Tyndareus. One evening when the young woman was bathing in a pool she saw floating majestically towards her a swan of dazzling whiteness. It was Zeus.<sup>12</sup>

In place of the swan I used a vacuum cleaner, a golden vacuum cleaner to note its 'magical' qualities or much like the icon of golden fruit being associated with sensual joy. (See FIGURES 7 -12)

I continued the series using a model to reproduce similar positions. A change in models denoted a change in the positioning of the figure which resulted in, what was noted in a seminar discussion, as Degas-like figures. I began to look at Degas pastel drawings and saw the similarities in the figure. The similarity ends there as Degas' models, prostitutes, were for the 'male gaze' wherein the vacuum cleaner series, the figure is totally preoccupied with the vacuum cleaner or, in some, the grey television. There are twelve small square images making up Leda I -X11.

Seven circular images, Hera and the Iron, are a continuation of the allegorical theme. Here I have used Hera, who was one of Zeus' wives to devise my own mythological saga: the starting point being that Hera was very jealous of Zeus's seductions.

*In order to lie with lo he (Zeus) took the form of a cloud of steam. When accused of infidelity by Hera, Zeus pleaded innocence and in order to put his wife off the scent, he changed his mistress into an iron. Hera's suspicions were aroused and she pretended to be deceived and asked him for the iron as a gift. But Hera was soon distracted by the television and forgot the iron.*

The images of Hera are positioned between the Leda series. In this series I have used a different model. I was intentionally looking at Ingres, but the sexuality of the Ingre-like figures are neutralised with the bored figure. There is no golden object for her use. The grey coloured background pervades the image.

I also wanted to make reference using the circular frame to note a view point. The figure viewing the television and the viewer of the object viewing her. The first twelve images, Leda I - XII are well contained within the framing. The second series had the figure stepping out of the circular, referring to the possibility of moving outside the private.

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<sup>12</sup>Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd, Middlesex England, 1978, pp106

Hose in hand

She watched  
the sharp fences

divided clipped lawn rectangles

each house

each garden

arranged

separately

detached

hard faces

side wise glances

a garage for

each car

she laughed

and turned her pale face

shoulders

and back

in streets

roads

terraces

circuits

places

ways

avenues

a rainbow

sprayed

when her thumb

pressed hard

towards the fence

and seriously

faced the annuals



Despite the excitement of producing hand embroidered images again I had to be disciplined so as to not overstress the muscles in my arm again. One image per week for five months, involved much energy, and allowed my mind to form the continuing body of work. I also worked on the apron series and tea cosies occasionally during this time.

As I sat in front of my sewing machine figuring out how to construct these potholders, I told myself: "just do it the way you make the school fete ones". The moment the thought materialised it dawned on me that, except the later dish cloths, in this last body of work I had made all the pieces as functional items for school fetes. Earlier writing which was included in my sub-thesis addressed this conjunction of women and textiles. A circle, spiral or double helix had begun to form between writing and practice over the last two years.

Once the potholders were finished I found that I could finally finish the aprons. I next embarked on writing text to embroider on bands designed for counted thread work which were then attached to linen tea towels. I had seen these bands embroidered many times by women previously, but with geometric patterns. I also had in mind the cross stitch samplers made in the past by young girls learning to embroider, and now by women trying to maintain a skill whose demise commenced with the industrial revolution and which has been hastened since World War II.

The text on the tea towels concern itself with order. The origins of the texts come from my personal journal. (See TEXT 1 and 2.) The tea towel itself brings about an order in the kitchen: the wiping and putting away of dishes. The presumption of order and cleanliness that a clean and tidied house will bring about. The novel Housekeeping that I mentioned earlier was a major influence in this work. I have taken little motifs as in the old samplers, but rather that using moral sayings and 'truths'; I was stating other sorts of 'truths'. (See FIGURE 13) By placing language on textiles or works that allude to textiles, they consciously link textiles and political (gender) issues.

The last series of work is the most difficult to write about. I have not had the distance from it or time to view it as I have the other objects. It deals with escape from the metamorphic shell, the ordinary and the old self. The unprotected pupa moves unsure of its body but knowing that strength will come and flight is necessary.

The dish cloth, again a kitchen textile but of the lowest kind, also brings about some sort of cleanliness, rather than the order created by the teatowels. The images on the dish cloths are about escape: using motifs such as ladder, windows and doors. I liken them to Cinderella: cleaning and wishing; thinking beyond the ordinary and the self while carrying out menial tasks.





Right: Sampler made by Lillian Clare Annear in 1868, aged seven, when she lived at South Yarra, Melbourne. Photo Kalbe Atkinson.



Sampler by Catherine Hains, Port Adelaide, 1866.  
Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia. Photo  
Stephanie Schrapel.

FIGURE 13 AUSTRALIAN EMBROIDERED SAMPLERS

She watches the sky  
the way her friends  
watch TV

Her head among the stars

Her feet on the edge of light  
before the shadow

Memory luring her  
from everyday reality

She turned

they didn't notice  
as she stepped off

I wove coloured threads between the existing warp and weft of the cloth with a needle to produce repetitive patterns of the above mentioned motifs. The work is titled "Patterns of Escape" and illustrates thoughts going through the mind in a repetitive fashion when one is threatened or anxious.

I have again used an arrow such as in the earlier work with the "Plans for the Housewife". This arrow plays an ambiguous role as an indicator of pressure or as a house.

In the last few weeks I could not help begin to hand embroider figurative images of escape. It may not belong to this body of work as an object. One extremely early piece of work I completed in the initial stages of the course was an image of a woman with a magic carpet which was entitled: "I've got this carpet to fly but how do I get it out the window". It was expressing the frustration of having skills and ideas and not being able to harness them into comprehensible work. In the last piece I use the magic carpet as a motif of escape and again the figure trying to harness the carpet. I feel the flying carpet will continue to be part of my visual language for a while.

Looking back over two years work I have realised that I have tended to work in series in resolving my understanding of the statements made about gender issues. I compare it to music: I feel one image cannot resolve all the intricacies in one study but a series of movements is required.

## CONCLUSION

I embroidered these images in order to create textiles which have historically been an engendered as a medium for domestic women. Women in the past have used embroidery as a medium to express emotional and political ideas. Rozika Parker's landmark The Subversive Stitch<sup>13</sup> illustrates that the personal is political through an historical account linking women and embroidery to politics in Britain. As mentioned in footnotes earlier, it is evident today in Australia that those who participate in organised embroidery groups are generally women who do not work (or if they do, have enough time to embroider at their leisure). They have finance available to them to buy materials, and be mobile to attend weekly meetings with or without children in toe. They belong to a particular socio-economic group, subtly reflecting this in the work they produce. The "D'Oyley Show" in Sydney, 1979, aimed to redress the imbalance of representation of women in art/craft history which also reflects the wider political imbalance.

The personal/political link described by Parker is also apparent in Australia. The National Gallery of Australia (NGA) and the Australian War Memorial (AWM) hold fine examples which illustrate this connection. One early textile that the NGA holds in its collection, is an embroidered quilt (known as the Fitzpatrick Inn quilt) which depicts Queen Victoria in

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<sup>13</sup>Parker, Rosika. *The Subversive Stitch*

the central medallion surrounded by images and sayings which give insight into the preoccupations of the maker on a small farm in Westbury at the close of the Victorian age. The War Memorial holds numerous commemorative works depicting battles fought by loved ones. The embroidered signatures on the Changi Prison Cloths (1942-45) was a record of the women that were still alive when the work left the camp. There also exists an embroidered skirt, (known as the Changi Camp Skirt) which was embroidered with signatures of imprisoned women. The women felt that "naming themselves made the skirt an important record and constituted an act of defiance in the face of anonymity and ignomy of imprisonment".<sup>14</sup> Women have used the 'invisibleness' of textiles to articulate overtly patriotic images in a way that may be prohibited within the usual political strategies.

During the 1980's banners were made at the women's camp at Pine Gap near Alice Springs from textiles made by women throughout the country who were forced to stay at home due to family commitments, but who nonetheless sent their needlework messages and emblems to the demonstrators to show their support.

Trade union banners have shown a very close link with women's involvement in the unions. Up until recently the banners tended to be designed by men and made by women. Since 1985 development in the arts have altered this and now artists work with the members of the union to create banners as well as develop theatrical performances, photography and literature.<sup>15</sup>

It has been the traditionalists who have kept embroidery alive through organised groups, and those of us who use it as medium for linking politics and art must be grateful for this legacy. Since the 1970's there has been renewed attention to textiles, and more specifically in my case, embroidery, by feminists to subtly interrogate the political. The most notable artist in Australia to use the medium of embroidery subversively is Narelle Jubelin, mentioned earlier.

Today the 'invisibleness' of textiles often gives artists a ready made metaphor to carry their ideas on gender issues. On the negative side this form of art making remains in the margins. It is working from the marginal that often discourages artists, the bulk who are female, from pursuing a career. Diana Wood Conroy suggests that textiles are used as a metaphor in our day to day language.<sup>16</sup> This adds to this 'invisibleness'.

I have found that in the last two years my work has had to move from a craft to an art base to partake in mainstream discussion - a very steep learning curve which I feel needs to continue. Looking back on earlier journal writings confusion is evident as to where my work sat with in the art/craft hierarchy. After the low period of the first half of 1993 I

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<sup>14</sup>Story, Holly "The Changi Skirt & Textiles of Resistance" *Craftwest* Winter 92 pp7

<sup>15</sup>Isaacs, Jennifer *The Gentle Arts* Landsdown Press 1987 pp184

<sup>16</sup>Wood Conroy, Diana. *Outside Looking In: Textiles and Marginality* Object, Autumn 1992, Crafts Council of NSW



seemed to have gotten over this internal struggle by writing about both my studio work and my thesis. After the final seminar in August 1993, I felt a new confidence in my work and the following discussion with my peers allowed me to really plough ahead into my work. The making became important again. The negativity and panic of not understanding where the direction lay had gone. Time became the constraining element.

I believe what I have been trying to do in my latest body of work is to bring about a reappraisal of textiles within the home. Western, consumerist societies have reduced the importance of the handmade textile to the domestic trifling, a part of the female which is disregarded - anything made 'by the hearth' is of no great importance outside the home.

I would like to continue to explore more closely an issue that came up independently in both the thesis and the studio practice: the school fete and the hand made. It is here that gender, textiles and monetary value are at its lowest. The attraction to this work is difficulty in the fine line to tread.

One of the more difficult issues which I have not fully resolved is where my audience lies. As discussed earlier the marginality of textiles often has access to only a lower status audience in Australia. How one places textiles outside this realm raises many difficulties from both within the textile medium as well as the centre of mainstream art. In my thesis I discussed the issue of audience with the survey participants. I implied that audience was related to the level of fine art education, and that this audience became narrower the higher the level. Here I find myself pursuing a higher level of art education. Am I heading for such a narrow audience when my base has been so broad? Is it possible for the base audience to move with me? Possibly the answer for me lies in educating both audiences and to continue my practice with high self esteem.

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For extended bibliography please refer to Sub-thesis



# CURRICULUM VITAE

## PERSONAL DETAILS:

Born Melbourne, Australia 1957

Resided in Perth, WA 1980-85

Resided in Canberra 1985-

## FORMAL EDUCATION:

-Currently undertaking Masters of Arts (Visual Arts)  
Institute of the Arts, Australian National University

-Diploma of Interior Design with Distinction  
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. 1976 - 1979

## OTHER COURSES:

- Textile soft sculpture (University of WA 1980)
- Machine Embroidery (University of WA 1980)
- Screen Printing (University of WA 1981 & Tresillian Community Centre, Perth 1982)
- Painting (Tresillian Community Centre, Perth 1983)
- AVL course Macintosh Computer Graphics (ITA 1993)

## EMPLOYMENT:

- Design tutor, RMIT (1979)
- Part-time designer for Cycles Interiors, Mont Albert, Melb (1979)
- Freelance Interior Designer 1981 -1984
- Part-time consultant for Aspect Interiors, Canberra (1986)
- Costume designer for Canberra Theatre Production "Ngambra" (1988)
- Designer for Embroidery for the Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney. (1988)
- Costume designer for ANU Arts Theatre Centre Production "Terra Beatta" 1989)
- Casual book reviewer for Edith Thompson's "Arts In Tempo" Radio National, ABC 1989
- Lobby Restaurant 1989 - 1991
- International Business Conferences , Liaison officer, 1992-1993
- Set up small business: "Tea Ware" - design and textiles 1990

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

- Tutor RMIT Interior Design 1979
- Tutor for the Embroiderers' Guild of ACT since 1990
- Crafts Council of ACT course in Embroidery and Design 1991
- Hawker College Community Classes: Embroidery and Design 1992

## **EXHIBITIONS (Group Shows):**

- Crafts Council Selected Members Exhibitions 1990, 1991.
- 'Christmas Collection 1990': Beaver Galleries, Canberra.
- Selected exhibitor at the Dame Nancy Buttfield Prize for Embroidery 1991, 1993.
- Proposed (and accepted) forthcoming exhibition: Gallery 3, Canberra, November 1994, with fellow artist Christine James.

## **COMMISSIONS:**

- Ms Bernadette Pilli, Melbourne
- Ms Anna Di Pietro, Interior Designer, Nowra
- Dr and Mrs M. Mickleburgh, Canberra
- Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney
- Mr David Chatto, Canberra
- Ms Christine Martin, Canberra

APPLICATION FOR TRANSFER FROM GRADUATE DIPLOMA TO MASTER OF  
ARTS:

Studio Practice Study Program:

The aim of the studio practice has been to explore the making of images and embroidered objects which reflect the culture of the home/family environment. I have been looking at women who work at home either because of family commitments or because of personal choice. This culture is shifting as changes in Australian society occur.

Initially I began by exploring the mechanisms which uphold any culture - rites and rituals ( housework), heroes (television, magazines), artefacts (iron motifs) and myths ( how women spend their time in suburbia). More recently I have been looking at these issues on a personal level - how I have perpetuated this role of women at home through my own rituals which have derived unconsciously not only from socially constructed values and beliefs but also from embellished memory of my own childhood.

Minor textile pieces have been constructed as explorations of the ritual of housework. Washing, hanging, folding, ironing. Arranging and rearranging. Often alone or encumbered by children. This was reinforced when I had read the catalogue of the Makers' Choice where tapestry artists Kay Lawrence cites in her essay a passage from Lynne Strahans: "The Half Open Door". "The worst thing about housework is not the terrifying inroads it makes into time, but the state of mind it encourages in which the arrangement of objects is confused with the control over one's life." Marilynne Robinson's novel "Housekeeping" also explores these themes.

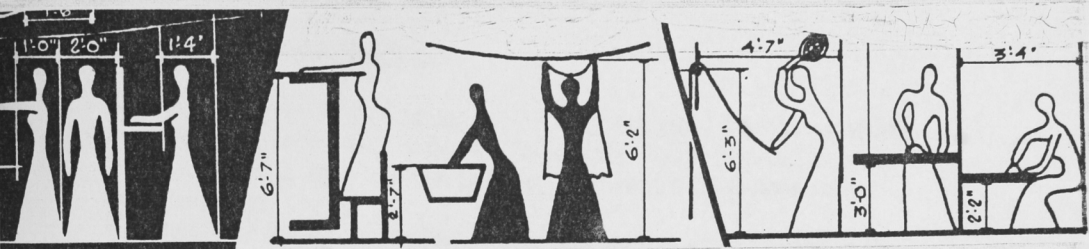
I have gone on to complete four embroidered works which reflected the mechanisms mentioned: the ritual of ironing, the heroes/heroines of television, the myths of what women do in their environments and the artefacts - the iron, the television, the rug.

I was also interested in looking at the relationship of the naked figure and the viewer of the image. I did not want to portray the figure as a sexual object but rather looking at the female form in her interior, sculpting her in the texture of thread.

The current series of work and final phase in the post-graduate program will look at the restrictions of interiors on 'domestic' women. I have



begun to incorporate house plans and architectural drawings, by either overlaying or as part of the background, building up images of women within.



## PROPOSAL FOR STUDIO PRACTICE

The proposed work will continue to look at the containment and imposition of interiors on 'domestic' women, again by incorporating house plans and architectural drawings, reflecting that architecture does not always reflect the way we live or want to live. It is more often than not a reflection of the designer's values - and women can be left out of the 'man-made' environment.

I feel this would lead directly into the work intended for the Master's program, particularly looking the period of women's lives when they are working at home. I see this as a metamorphic period for women with the desires, conscious or unconscious, for eventual freedom. Most women in the last twenty years have known this period does not last for long - either for economic or personal reasons. Some relish this period of their lives by building interior structures within, reinforcing and protecting the shell. It often seems in pupa form that all life is suspended, yet internal changes are taking place. Some fight the containment of social and environmental structures imposed, eager to resume their identity which has undergone change.

This is where the main body of work will lie but possibly developing towards images and concepts concerning emergence from restriction, expansion, projection beyond the self and the ordinary.

I will continue to hand embroider these figurative images. Through my post-graduate work my design stage and translation into textiles did not always work. Through experimenting I found more suitable drawing materials which are better suited to various fibres used in embroidery eg pastel designs and wool, watercolour and silk thread.

## CURRENT RESEARCH PRACTICE

My Research paper is well underway. The objective of the post graduate paper is to ascertain why many textile artists choose to practice their craft in intimate work centres or family /domestic situations rather than the formal studio.

The paper has focused on fifteen practicing textile artists based in the Canberra region and endeavours to identify what options were open to them when they chose to create from the home environment.

Working in such an environment I was interested in seeing at what point in their lives they felt they needed a work space, the physical and geographic location of the studio, education, finance, their working conditions, and the end product of their labours. Other influences related to this area which I looked at were age, gender, and family.

The investigation of the individual artists entailed a series of personal interviews, recorded where possible, then transcribed. All the information has been collated and written up. I am in the process of writing my conclusions drawn from the survey and recent literature published. In addition each artists' profile will include a short biography.

Chapter headings are:

Introduction - includes methodology of survey, questions and short biographies of each artist.

Education - looking at the importance, if any, of formal textile education, where and how participants were educated in textiles and a short history of textile education in Australia.

Studios - looking at geographic and artistic isolation and the problems associated with working in the domestic environment.

Finance - looking at how the participants support their artistic life in a marginal medium.

Femininity and Textiles - looking at the negative associations between femininity and textiles with the survey results and a historical context

Work - looking at the question of whether the participants call themselves 'artists', where they get current textile information from, their influences, their artistic drive and the exhibition process.

Conclusions - in the process of being written

## PROPOSAL FOR THE RESEARCH PAPER FOR THE M.A. COURSE OF STUDY

From the research outlined above many questions have been raised. The regional sample of women and their domestic situation reflect some of the changes that have occurred in post war Australian society. It is likely that had the survey been executed in the 1970's during the initial growth of textiles as a media in the art movement, a very different picture would have been evident. Very few would have undertaken tertiary education, but it would have been on the rise as the brief era of no tertiary fees allowed a wider range of people to be educated, particularly women.

The rise of feminism since the 1960's has hastened many positive changes for women in general, but more particularly in this paper, the education of women, having a space for their own work, and sources of personal finance. There has been a growing separation of the public and private lives of women as they choose to work outside the home for financial reasons or seeking their own ambitions and dreams. This poses a difficulty for artists working in textiles in studios attached to the home, as they try to maintain high self esteem, using textiles as a media to express themselves and yet combatting society's negative associations with textiles as 'women's work' and the view that ambitions and careers are sought outside the domestic environment.

Although only two of the participants in the survey lived in the middle to outer suburbs of Canberra I am interested in how the growth of the great suburban sprawl has affected women and propose a study of the growth and development of the Australian suburban house, since the post war era, which perpetuated the role of the domestic woman. A history of Government policy on housing, bank ownership and home loan interest rates have played a major role in the formation of the suburbia and the environment in which families lived. The decline of the nuclear family has only just begun to filter through to town planning and housing development. One way of looking at these changes is through the house plans designed and disseminated by developers and perhaps contrasting these with commissioned architects' plans for unique houses to see how much of the educated ideals have filtered through. Also urban development plans would give a wider context in reflecting the white, anglo saxon male values and beliefs that have been imposed on our cities in Australia.

I have had much interest and concern with domestic architecture and environmental design since undergraduate studies in interior design. Since moving to Canberra and observing so called inevitable changes in a growing city, much has not been built on learnt mistakes, but a continuation of patterns of development from other Australian cities.



The two major growth spurts of the suburban growth in Canberra was in the late 1950's under Menzies, and in the 1970's when the Whitlam Labour government expanded the public service to cater for its' needs. As with the study on textile artists and their studios, I intend to look at the Canberra region within the Australian context.

The opportunity of using the environmental concerns of the 70's have not been taken up. The oil crisis then called for greater research and use of alternate power and energy sources. Governments have not embarked whole heartedly on these issues and developers seem to be only interested in monetary gain. I may discover that the absence of women in the decision making process has affected our cities and designed spaces.

As stated the designed space does not always reflect the way we live or work - nor the way we want to live. The designed space can often be a reflection of the architects' and town planners' values - and women can often be left out of the "man-made" environment. In 1985 only 5% of architects were women; in 1990 it has grown to just below 10%. This growth has not radically changed mainstream architecture let alone the building and land development industries. Surely the vast suburban expanses of our Australian cities reflect this figure. Do all families really need singular family housing? Other well designed options are not affordably offered. People do not have a free choice when looking for somewhere to live - the choice comes from constraints - not options. Money being the major determining factor.

Housing and car registration are used as an economic indicators of the Australian economy. No other country uses this measure in determining their growth or decline. Cars are now the major transport in Australia to the suburban sprawl. Planned congestion has been the major deterrent in inner city areas of Melbourne and Sydney, but as regional suburban centres develop this is harder to control. The changes and growth of suburbia are dependant on these factors. Access to a car for women at home with children has become a necessary vehicle of escape.

The hidden economy of unpaid women working in the home supported and perpetuated the self effacing image that women at home have had. This is becoming more apparent as more and more women return to or decline to leave the work force. The need to pay for child care, house cleaning and other domestic duties grows. The employment created by women returning to the paid workforce must be substantial but it cannot be determined easily as domestic work is so often a 'cash-in-hand' arrangement.

Many alternate views have been expounded by radical American feminists in the 1970's and '80's. American architect Leslie Welsman, who helped found the Women's School of Planning and Architecture Summer School, also suggests similar ideas in a discussion, recorded on the Coming Out Show (Radio National 1985), on women in the 'man-made' environment. She offers the scenario of pulling down the backyard fences - so that they become a public common - safe for children to play, communal child care, vegetable allotments, shared laundry facilities etc. Marilyn French from her book "The Womens' Room" suggests:

"Suppose we built houses in a circle, or in a square, or what ever connected houses of varying sizes, but beautiful, simple. And in the middle would be a garden with benches and trees and people could grow flowers, it would be a common ..... At the other side of the houses, would be a community centre..... with playrooms for the kids and the adults and sitting rooms with books. But everyone in the community, from the smallest walking child would have a job in it."

These are some of the avenues I wish to explore in looking at the hidden economy and its affect on textile artists.

I hope that I would be able to use Professor Judith Brine from the University of Canberra as a consultant during the course of my studies.

It is envisaged that the proportion of the Research Paper will be 30% and that I would enrol as a full-time student for 1993.

